

Episode 7 Transcript: Moving Through Grief

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Join Pablo and Aarti as they reflect on grief and loss one year after the pandemic.

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[Aarti Dhanda:] Hey, everyone, this is Aarti and Pablo. Hi, Pablo.

[Pablo Gonzalez:] Hey, Aarti.

[Aarti Dhanda:] How are you doing?

[Pablo Gonzalez:] I'm doing okay today. How are you?

[Aarti Dhanda:] Me, same, same. I'm enjoying the sunshine. So yeah, today we're here at the one-year mark of the pandemic and talking about grief and all that comes with it. And as I was reflecting on preparing for our session today, I was really thinking about last year at this time of year. And I guess I wonder if you feel comfortable reflecting on this with me. But thinking about what that was like at this point last year, like if we think back to when we first learnt about this, you know, what kind of emotions and thoughts and feelings came up. And I'm wondering about that because it's been a journey. And I think many other people probably might relate to similar parts of their journey as we talk about this topic today.

[Pablo Gonzalez:] Yeah, I remember about a year ago, and it was obviously in the news. And we weren't quite sure what was going to happen in general or, like, what work was going to look like or anything like that. And it was pretty scary. I think it was pretty scary to not know. I felt unsure and kind of didn't have much footing. And it seemed like information was coming out in dribs and drabs. And I was finding out what life was going to start looking like in dribs and drabs too. And then -- and I don't know if this is jumping too far ahead, but maybe like a month or two, I started feeling something despair.

[Aarti Dhanda:] No, I don't think that's too far in at all. And actually, as you're saying that, I can imagine the images like coming to my mind and like the dribs and drabs and coming to terms with, like, what life was going to look like. And I can totally relate to that. That definitely resonates with me. I think what I would odd for me, because I had a major life event coming up that then I put on hold with the pandemic. But I think for me, what was coming up was a sense of shock. Like, I didn't -- my first question when my partner told me that it was a pandemic was what's a pandemic? Like, you know, it was very confusing, right? And, you know, being an optimistic person, I'm sure many people are -- and even if you're a more realistic person, doesn't really matter. Like, we're all in the same boat. And it was sometimes challenging to kind of come to terms with what was changing, and it was changing for everyone.

[Pablo Gonzalez:] I remember moments of feeling like everything was just surreal, that this couldn't be the reality, kind of in denial in a way. Like, how could this be that I can't spend time with my family or that I have to wear a mask wherever I go. And I have to be cautious and nervous or worried at least about my health and safety just like walking around in the streets of Toronto. It took a long time to get used to it.

[Aarti Dhanda:] Yeah, it took a long time. And I would say that even as we're just discussing this, like, my therapist brain is going, oh, I'm noticing all the stages of change as we're talking about it, right? Like, there's that confusion, the shock, like, the adjustment to this was a long period. There's this sense of grief. There's a sense of loss. There's a worry. There's, for me, maybe for you, for lots of people some frustration, you know, sadness. Like even though -- denial. Like, even though these things or maybe some people are aware of what these stages are, you know, they don't really happen in that type of order. Right? Like they kind of -- it's more like they're weaved in and then kind of come and go based on those situations. And, you know, I think maybe as I reflect on it a year later as an in the present, I wouldn't be surprised if lots of people still feel some shock, right? Like -- of like I can't believe it's been a year. And, you know, this is a situation we're in or even other moments throughout the year. You know, I don't want to just limit our conversation to the pandemic. But there have been so many events in the world. And they think that because we're all having this collective grief and experience, you know, I don't know that I can say this for sure. But this is my personal experience. When we feel connected, we also are more possibly connected to others' pain as well. And, you know, I'm glad to see that people are bringing up and talking about the disparities in the world and how we want things to be better in the future. But there's pain in that, too, to see others suffering, right, you know, in terms of discrimination in terms of, you know, what happens in other countries, you know, just oppression overall. And so I think we've had layers. We've had layers of grief and loss and shock and frustration. And it can be difficult to talk about this. But I'm going to suggest that there can even be some hopefulness that comes out of these experiences. So if listeners are still with us, then I'm really glad, because I know that this may be hard to talk about. And a part of us wants to avoid it. But leaning into it, I think, with curiosity can help us see, well, what's at the end of the tunnel, that there is light at the end of the tunnel, hopefully. At least, my internal optimist is going to continue to hold on to that. So I don't know what your thoughts are.

[Pablo Gonzalez:] It comes to mind that, like, I think you and I share our philosophy about that we never want to lose access to different parts of our being, even when sometimes those parts of our beings we're not super proud of. They are parts of us. And it's probably better for us to accept it than to reject them. Anyway, so I think the same thing about this pandemic is like, there was some interesting things that have come out of it, too, as well as the hard thing. So I think about, like, I loved fiction that had to do with dystopias when I was growing up. And all of a sudden, I'm living in it. And, you know, that's kind of an interesting thing to look at the world through that lens and to see what -- how that would affect me and affect my friends and family, the effect on the world. So that -- there was a -- as I was going through these stages of grief and other emotional things, there was also this, like, kind of intellectualization of it as an interesting phenomenon that was occurring in the world that I'm still interested to see how this is all going to pan out for all of us and the long

term effects of living like this. And yeah, so I'm just kind of intellectually curious about it, too. So that's in there, too. And then there was fun stuff. Oh, sorry. Go ahead.

[Aarti Dhanda:] Oh, no, no. Please, go ahead.

[Pablo Gonzalez:] Like, I started playing, doing stuff online that I've never done before. Like, I never played Dungeons and Dragons until I needed to do something online. And then all of a sudden, I was playing Dungeons and Dragons, which is like a lifelong dream of mine. I have very small dreams. But that was definitely one of them. And I got a chance to do that. And so we're learning that I could work remotely and that I didn't need to have a supervisor observing me at all times to get my job done. You know, that I -- I've learnt that about myself, because I never had to -- never had that challenge in my life. And then when I did, I did okay with it. So learning about myself has been an interesting experience, too.

[Aarti Dhanda:] Thank you for sharing that, Pablo. I'm sure many people can really. And whether there's doing school online, and they're like, all of a sudden, the structures are removed. There's definitely challenges with it. But then maybe they're learning about, you know, their internal abilities. And as you were talking and even smiling, I was thinking about -- this word kept coming to me. And that was resilience. And that's what I kept thinking about when you were sharing and that, you know, maybe people are familiar with that word. If not, what I mean by it is like our -- when our normal ways of coping are not really available, like, you know, maybe in the past, our selfcare was very much focussed on doing things with other people or distracting ourselves with different things, not saying that those are bad, those are great strategies. But when those were not as available to us, you know, were there other strengths that we found within ourselves that we didn't know existed? And maybe we wouldn't have explored if our preferred options were available to us as frequently. And, you know, that doesn't take away from the sadness or the losses of the pandemic and everything else. It's just -- and I definitely don't want to minimize that. But it's just going off of what you're talking about, that's what it makes me think about.

[Pablo Gonzalez:] Yeah. When we're talking about grief and all the things that come along with it and, you know, it's been my experience and the experience of a lot of people that I talk to that challenging times in their lives are opportunities for growth. And growth is sometimes really hard and difficult and sad and all that stuff. Not that I'm grateful for these challenges, but I have grown from them. And, you know, in talking about grief and thinking about my own grief in my life, I think we often associate it with that. But it goes much deeper than that, doesn't it? It's about a loss of all kinds of things. And it could just be the loss of social connection or not being able to get a hug from a friend. Those are losses that are worthy of our attention and worthy of our grief. But we can learn from those experiences, too. And resilience is one of those things that can grow out of a challenging experience.

[Aarti Dhanda:] Yeah, I'm so glad you said that, Pablo. So yeah, I learnt this past year about something called secondary grief. And I think it's really important. So basically, what it means is thought, you know, you like you sad, we often think about grief as only being tied to death. But, you know, it could be tied to lots of things. It could be tied to someone who has a stroke, and they lose part of their functioning of their body, or they go through

another health issue or something less physically noticeable can also be something we grieve, right? And the secondary losses are all the things that come with that, right? So it reminds me this analogy I learnt that that I'll share. It's of the hallway. So basically, if you think about a hallway, and you imagine that you're standing there in a hallway, and there's these two walls. And it's a little bit of a long hallway. And at the end of the hallway is where you want to get to. Maybe that's where the light is. That's where, you know, the hope is. But when you're standing there in the hallway, there's this gap. And if you imagine that one wall represents, like, what is true? So in this situation, it would be we're in a pandemic. What's true is there are these particular restrictions or things that I need to do to keep myself safe and keep other people safe. There's these changes to how I go about my day to day stuff, right? And then the other wall is what I wish was true, right? So that could be I wish things were back to normal. I wish I could give my friend a hug. I wish I could go to class like I used to or imagined going to, you know, or that I could have some celebrations, with people. And then this gap between the -- what is true and what I wish was true, that's grief, because we can't bring the two together. But then we got to walk through the hallway, coming to terms with and accepting this gap. And by the time -- hopefully, by the time we get to the end of the hallway, the idea is that we've come to a new meaning or new learning, a new way to kind of interpret the gap. Right? It doesn't take the pain away from the gap. But people who go through grief, they often talk about when they feel like they've healed from the grief, they've come to a new meaning, a new way of looking at something or a new way of being.

[Pablo Gonzalez:] I think to me that almost sounds like it could be a spiritual experience. And could you talk to me a little bit about spirituality and how that plays into this?

[Aarti Dhanda:] Yeah, for sure. So that is another topic I'm very interested in. And the way that I learn about this -- so there is actually a connection between psychology and spirituality. From a psychology perspective, the way that I have come to learn to interpret spirituality. It's when you connect with something greater than yourself. So it doesn't mean you have to be religious or anything. But it is -- from a psychology perspective, it is about how do I view myself, my purpose, what I'm here -- what do I want to do with my life, kind of? How do I view other people? How do I view my ability to, you know, connect with them, trust them, rely on them? And all of that comes from this overarching thing of how do I view the world? Do I view the world as a safe place, a hopeful place? Do I view humans as being mostly good? Do I view them as mostly unreliable, you know, not so great people? So it really depends on this view we have of others, the world, you know, myself, my purpose. This is all spirituality. And when it comes to grief, grief, like, really likes to just really hit us hard and kind of shake that core that we had. And grief actually affects us in these four areas of, like, affects us physically. Like, in our body, we'll notice it. Like, in our concentration or energy level or, you know, sleep or eating, you know, just feeling blah. And then it affects us emotionally like you and I were talking about. It affects us socially, which has been even harder with the pandemic in terms of not even having social connection. So anyone who's lost a loved one in the pandemic has found it to be really difficult because normally, that's a time when you'd come together with others physically in the same space or hugging or just consoling. Now that's been harder. And even people who have it, that's been harder for everyone. And then, spiritually, I think we're all, like, being challenged in all

these four areas for a prolonged period of time. And when we have this kind of prolonged period of stress, the challenges, though, we still expect ourselves to function as though none of this is happening. And that can add to the pain.

[Pablo Gonzalez:] Sure. Yeah. We're supposed to. We're meant to. And we have to keep carrying on. But yeah, I hope that people are doing that with kindness for themselves, you know. Like, I know that I've had to be much more patient and kind with myself for this period of time. Otherwise, I would be causing myself a lot of suffering.

[Music]

[Aarti Dhanda:] So Pablo, you said wow. So I want to ask you, what stood out about what I said, because I just did a lot of talking?

[Pablo Gonzalez:] I have so much difficulty connecting to ideas, a concept of spirituality. But I find it fascinating. And if I could connect to something larger in this pandemic, it is some sense of hopefulness that everybody, and I'll include everybody in this, is trying their best with what they have to be connected, to be human, to remain decent to one another. Some people are trying a little harder than others. And some people have more tools at their disposal to do that. But I do have the sense that we're working towards something greater as a country or a school or a society, I don't know. But I feel like I'm a part of something larger. And that has to do with maybe a collective suffering and a collective desire to see this change. Does that make sense?

[Aarti Dhanda:] Yes, I think that makes sense. So I think without even realizing it, you are talking to your view as well. Right? And I think as therapists, most of us therapists are going to have a similar view. We are usually optimistic and see, you know, see the -- what their resilience is, what their strengths are. We're talking about these things very generally. But, you know, there are layers, like I said, of grief and loss. And it can be sometimes hard to see the meaning part of the grief and how to get to the other side. You know, I just want to validate that, although that is a whole other topic on its own as well. But as we're talking about going through the experience of grief, I think what you said there is valuable, right? And in terms of this experience of the spiritual peace and going inward, learning more about ourselves, going through these different emotions, that it takes time, you know, to come to terms with this. All of that is what I've learnt about grief. All of that reflects that. And we call it survivor mode. And a lot of people relate to that. Like, it feels like you're just putting one foot in front of the other. And it's even harder, right? It's doing the things that I normally did with much more ease before. It's taking so much more energy out of me now. And that's why I think it's important that if we're going to talk about what's the solution to this is said so many times before, but self-compassion because, you know, the thing is that we're -- when you're in that chronic stress, and you're in that survival mode for long periods of time, realistically, there's multiple losses for everyone. Right? Even if everything else in your life is going perfectly, just the amount of losses we've had as a society affects us. And then most people have had some personal experience as well. So I think it's just very important for us to give ourselves permission to recognize that some things are going to be harder, even though it's been a year. And even though, like, a part of me has gotten used to it, there is another part of me that is just in survival mode. It's just kind of like it's not at

its optimal, but it's kind of like gotten used to this way for now. So we need to recognize that gap, too, between how I'm functioning and how I would love to be functioning, and just, you know, sit with that gap and kind of practice some self-compassion with that. And I know that society's going to put pressure on us to kind of function as though we would have if none of this happened. But I think we can come together as a community. And the more we talk about it, the more we all can have compassion for everyone. Right? And that antidote to the shame feelings, the grief feelings, is compassion, because it allows for connection, right? And often, with grief, we disconnect. So I just did a lot of talking. So I'm going to pause. What do you think?

[Pablo Gonzalez:] I'm thinking about, like, you were saying that there are concrete things that have occurred over the past year or year and a bit that are really troubling and worthy of grief. And so we've seen racialized violence. And we've seen gendered violence. And we've seen examples of transphobia and homophobia and all these things are kind of, like, magnified under the rubric or the reality of the pandemic. It just seems it's harder to hide these things in society anymore. Income inequality has certainly been an issue that people are experiencing firsthand. And it's, like, people that work in service industries have been more exposed to the virus than people who are able to work online. Like, there's all these different things that have really come to light and are worthy of grief. And I think, for myself, I've certainly -- that's been in the calculation of my own grief over the past year. And trying to make sense of any of that stuff is a challenge at any time, but during a pandemic, certainly. How do you feel about that?

[Aarti Dhanda:] Yeah, I agree. And I think it takes me back to the same pieces of, like, the level of grief. So when I said six secondary losses, that's what I would be referring to, right? Like, maybe we've lost our ability to go out and about the way we did. But then the secondary losses would be, like, what does that mean? How does that affect my life, my friendships or whenever? And that same thing with these other examples that you just gave. I think of it the same way as, like, you know, there's these losses of lives. And there's the secondary losses of what society is like and what we wanted to be like and, you know, how much progress we want to have seen. And so I think like, I'm on the same page as you. And what makes me hopeful is our students because, you know, our students, other people, who are working really hard to be the best version of themselves without trying to be perfect and who are more open to change, maybe, or just very aware of these different issues and are willing to be vulnerable and willing to advocate. And I think that's really beautiful. And I think I'm -- and I feel inspired when I see --

[Pablo Gonzalez:] Very proud and also inspired by them.

[Aarti Dhanda:] Yeah, I completely love the way you said that. It's so true, right? Like, in order to decide to be a student at this time, you have to have some hope that, you know, there will be a future for you in which there will be some sense of, I don't know, if I want to use the word normal, but some moving forward in a positive way. And yeah, and everything else that our students do, right? So I feel like I don't have much to offer in terms of skills today. But I think it's more of acknowledgement of the skills that everyone already has. You know, the one thing I would highlight is to recognize, again, how are you doing physically? How are you doing emotionally or mentally? How are you doing socially? And

how are you doing spiritually? And kind of do this, like, checking in with yourself around these four different things and then making, you know, just a small little commitment to yourself in terms of what you can do that day. You know, that's really helped me through the pandemic as well, just sharing, you know, maybe it's not going to be the same thing every day, because, you know, you just don't have the same sustainable capacity all the time. But that doesn't mean that you can't do something for yourself every day. Like, maybe one day it's, I didn't drink enough water yesterday. So of all these four things, today, I'm going to focus on physically how I can help myself. And I'm going to just make sure I get enough water. And maybe the next day, it's like, well, I haven't taken a walk in, like, three days. I'm going to go for a walk, right? Or maybe the next –

[Pablo Gonzalez:] Aarti, I think you're speaking directly to me right now. This is a bit of a counselling session for myself. I'm going to go for a walk today because the sun is out, and that's rare these days. And I'm going to go out for a walk for sure.

[Aarti Dhanda:] Great, awesome. Yeah. But that's what I mean, right? Like, and, you know, socially can be more difficult right now but we can still send a text. We can schedule a phone call. You know, I'm a big advocate. Let's bring the phone back. Like, I love talking on the phone.

[Pablo Gonzalez:] You do?

[Aarti Dhanda:] Not surprisingly, I love podcasts, because I like hearing people's voice. So anyway, I'm going to say if people start talking on the phone more often after the pandemic, that would be a big win for me in my books.

[Pablo Gonzalez:] What if I continue dodging phone calls and just texting people a few hours later? Can I do that?

[Aarti Dhanda:] Yes, you can. But I'm going to be hopeful that people would be more comfortable talking on the phone. That's what I'm hoping for post pandemic.

[Pablo Gonzalez:] Oh, this is a good topic. What else are you hoping for? Like, small hope. Let's not dream too big. But right now, what is one thing that you've been missing that you're really looking forward to?

[Aarti Dhanda:] I would love to see -- after the pandemic, I would love to see people choosing different types of activities to do when they get together. Maybe it's not always going to be a movie or dinner at a nice restaurant. I would love for people to have more picnics. I would love for people to, like, play frisbee or go skating. I would love to see people hold on to this forced, you know, variety and creativity that we've had to come up with in terms of how to have social connection continue so that we don't just default back to what's easy.

[Pablo Gonzalez:] Okay. So that's great. Then I'm thinking along the same lines. I'm thinking that I've curbed a lot of my -- or they've been curbed. A lot of my consumerism, like, consumeristic tendencies have waned. And I want to continue that because actually, I don't need or want that much stuff in my life. And I do want to explore and be a part of more

public spaces. If I'm missing anything, it's just people. And so a picnic at a public park or a barbecue in a park would be beautiful. I would love to do that.

[Aarti Dhanda:] Yes. And of course, like, I'm not saying don't go to restaurants. I love restaurants. But I'm also hoping that people will remain, you know, even more engaged in terms of advocacy and things that are important to them, staying connected to nature, connected to each other, supporting each other, speaking up for each other, in terms of. So I think those are the bigger things I definitely still hope for. But in the little day to day moments, I would love to see people, you know, embracing the nature.

[Pablo Gonzalez:] So Aarti, thank you so much for this really interesting and heartfelt conversation about grief. I really appreciate it.

[Aarti Dhanda:] Yeah, you too, Pablo. It's been a great conversation and really felt like a nice reflection, holding both, you know, the struggles we've had and also some silver lining, hopefully, that we can look forward to in our growth as a society.

[Pablo Gonzalez:] I have one little hopeful silver lining for maybe you and I that maybe one of these days, you and I could actually be physically in person together in a park or something close to nature. And we could record a podcast like that.

[Aarti Dhanda:] Oh, that would be so cool. We'll have to make sure that we get the birds in the background.

[Pablo Gonzalez:] Exactly.

[Aarti Dhanda:] Okay. Well, it was really great chatting with you, Pablo.

[Pablo Gonzalez:] You too, Aarti. Thank you very much.

[Aarti Dhanda:] Thanks for listening, guys.

[Music]

So this concludes today's episode. Thank you for joining us. If you have any questions, feedback on our episodes, suggestions for future topics or wish to book an appointment with our counsellors, please send us an email at letstalk@georgebrown.ca. Come by again and let's talk.